One woman wrote to a newspaper in response to an article about divorce laws, sharing her plea for making divorce more accessible: “I married, unthinkingly, a man whom I did not love…I reflect how much better a woman I should have been had love and not duty, ruled me” (Yalom 271). In this quote, a wife reflects on her marriage, saying that she wished she had married for love. The unspoken but implied portion of this quote adds that she would have been happy if she had married for love instead of “duty”. This letter to the newspaper was written in the late 19th century at the beginning of the New Woman’s presence in America. We had already seen the suffragists fighting for their rights in the late 1800’s, and in the early 20th century, we began to see how women as a whole were changing. Marriage was one of those areas where drastic change was expected and accomplished by the New Woman. In the quote above, we see a women seeking marriage for its emotional benefits – love and personal satisfaction. This search for personal satisfaction was the most influential player in deciding the role the New Woman would take in marriage. In fact, a woman’s personal satisfaction and fulfillment replaced the Victorian concept of being a dutiful wife as the criteria for a successful marriage in the 1920’s. This change was supported by the new emphasis on sexual satisfaction for the wife and husband in marriage, the introduction of marriage counseling and marriage experts into society, and the overall social acceptance of divorce.

In the Victorian Era, women had a quite restrictive role in marriage and their role was strictly defined. One classic attribute of Victorian marriages is the doctrine of separate spheres and “the cult of domesticity” (Yalom 259). The doctrine of separate spheres essentially stated that men and women had different roles in the home; that it was a man’s duty to provide financially for the home, work, and ‘bring home the bacon’ and that it was a woman’s duty to care for her husband. This would include cooking, cleaning, caring for children, and all other tasks that were not fulfilled by her husband. The cult of domesticity merely refers to this same doctrine and criticizes its unbending in its expectations of women in the home. Other aspects of the Victorian Era included the concept of a dowry or “hope chest”. Although it was not part of practice in the early 20th century, it was still part of the ideology of Victorian marriages (260). Women still owed their husbands for the care, support and protection that they received as a benefit of marriage.

Another cornerstone of Victorian marriages is the lack of physical intimacy, especially that which occurred in public; even a peck on the cheek in public could be considered shameful. Yalom states that “Victorian courtship…ruled out greater physical intimacy” (242). This often translated to a lack of sex in the marriage. Often, sex was viewed purely as a way to have children and rarely perceived as having the purpose of pleasure (at least in the view of the wife). Lastly, regardless of the abuse in the marriage, in the Victorian Era, divorce was considered a “stigma of which would cling to my all my future life” according to one divorcee in mid to late 1900s (261). Even in an abusive relationship, many women would prefer to put up with the abuse than suffer the shame of moving back to their parents’ home which would most likely be their only option in the case of a divorce. The significant majority of the time, husbands and wives merely separated to avoid the stigma of divorce and only formalized the divorce if one wished to remarry, and even in those cases, often if one were remarrying in another territory of the United States, there would be no record of the previous marriage and they could remarry without the burden or stigma of divorce (261). The Victoria Era was a time of strict guidelines for how a marriage should be, and if a wife was dutiful, respectful, and fulfilled her husband’s desires, the marriage was considered successful and the wife would be satisfied in her marriage.

For the New Woman, this was not the case. She required personal satisfaction to have a successful marriage, and one way this was achieved was through physical intimacy with her husband – sex. In the novel *The Modern Temper* by Lynn Dumenil, Dumenil discusses the new found sexuality of the 1920’s woman. Dumenil’s primary argument includes the acknowledgement of a new sexual eroticism that women became aware of within themselves as well as a sexual objectification of women in society (142). She uses an example of petting among other things to show how sexuality came into the larger society (137). Specifically, she quotes a letter a girl wrote to an advice columnist asking about the appropriateness of petting and the tendency of males in the area of petting. The fact that these issues were showing up in advice columns makes it clear that these were relatively common issues that were somewhat socially acceptable to discuss. Intimacy (not sex) outside of marriage was becoming more and more acceptable in this time, and with this, intimacy within marriage (sex) also was permitted to have a more significant role. The desire for personal fulfillment and satisfaction was fulfilled through the increased role of sex in marriage, and sex was used to liberate women within marriage.

Another scholar, Marilyn Yalom, had similar things to say about sex in marriage in her novel, A *History of the Wife*. In her novel, there are only two chapters that are relevant to this paper, but those two chapters are bloated with information that restates a variegated combination of the aforementioned arguments. In between a variety of comments about the New Woman, contraception, sex and abortion, she makes the argument that along with the New Woman came an important change in the role of sex in marriage. She states that there has become a “central role place accorded to sex in marriage” (Yalom, 310). Basically, the role of sex in marriage has become larger, and is instead of simply being a necessity for bearing children (its traditional Victorian purpose), it is also being used as a way of finding personal gratification and satisfaction in marriage. Yalom supports this by referencing two separate psychological surveys done by Katherine Bement Davis and Gilbert Hamilton.

In fact psychology played a significant role in bringing about the changed role of sex in marriage. There was a progression of scholars who brought the topic of women’s sexual desires into the arena of marriage. First, Freud initiated many of the scholarly discussions of sex and inherent sexual desire as a motivator for man. The problem here is that Freud focused specifically on that, man, not women. It took Havelock Ellis to acknowledge women’s sexuality. In fact, Havelock Ellis was a champion of women in this time period. However, Ellis did not take the concept of women’s sexual desire into the context of marriage; that work was done in the surveys of Davis and Hamilton. Davis did a survey about wives’ use of contraception, how often they have sex, how often they masturbate (for single women), and how they feel about sex. For example, he found that “30% of the wives judged their sexual appetites to be as strong as their husbands’” (Yalom 309). Hamilton’s survey attempted to find a “correlation between sexual satisfaction and marital happiness” or what I would refer to as personal satisfaction (310). One thing that Hamilton found was that many of the wives he interviewed had never experienced an orgasm – something that would clearly be considered a key part of a woman’s sexual satisfaction. Yalom summarized Davis and Hamilton’s 1929 work generally, saying that “sex was widely accepted as a conjugal good, irrespective of procreative possibility” (309).

With their newly acknowledged sexual desire, women strove to find personal satisfaction and fulfillment in a loving marriage, but they couldn’t be fully satisfied in a loveless, sexless marriage or one with a lazy, uncaring husband. In the past, women simply put up with their husbands’ nuances, bad habits, and other negative traits; it was part of their role as a faithful wife in the Victorian Era. For the New Woman, there were two alternatives to simply sticking with a problematic marriage – fix the marriage or get a divorce.

Those who chose divorce to escape an unsatisfying marriage were faced with the potentially unbending divorce laws of their state. Some states, like New York, required evidence of adultery, abuse, etc to allow a divorce, and without sufficient evidence, would not permit a divorce in their state. Even in cases of abuse it could be difficult for a spouse to get a divorce if they did not have extensive evidence of the faults of their abusive spouse. For those who either lived in a state with unrestrictive divorce laws like Nevada or those who had substantial proof of adultery, physical abuse, or some other significant fault in their husband, divorce was easy to obtain. Regardless of the strictness of the divorce laws of their state, it was clear that changes were being made in social acceptance of divorce. Although many states were very strict about divorces, others were not, and divorce across the nation was becoming more and more prevalent due to these inconsistencies. In the 1920s, Nelson Blake spoke in his novel, *The Road to Reno: a History of Divorce in the United States*, regarding women’s escape to Reno away from unsuccessful or unhappy marriages.

Reno, Nevada is an example of one of the previously mentioned states with lenient divorce laws. Blake uses this as his primary example and evidence for the positive influences of divorce. While states and Congress were debating the government’s role in setting divorce standards, Reno was economically profiting from the indecision of the nation’s government. During the 1920’s, states were in control of setting laws regarding who can get divorced and how long they must be residents in that state before they can legally divorce there. Most states set their resident requirement at one year in the 1920’s. However, due to Reno’s large mining population, it was more practical to set the requirement at six months – in concordance with mining contracts (Blake, 152). Some states, including New York, maintained their standards about divorce laws and had very high standards for divorce (Blake, 148). This resulted in New Yorkers traveling to Reno for divorces. Reno became a hotspot for tourism as well as the locale of a profitable divorce business. Residents of other states (primarily New York) would spend their money, enjoying Reno’s tourist attractions, while they waited six months to get their divorce. Soon, other states started lowering their residency requirement to be competitive with Reno. However, Reno continued to lower their requirement and remain competitive. In fact, as Reno continued to shorten the separation period to eventually a period of six weeks, the number of divorces of New Yorkers occurring in Reno, Nevada, rose from 1000 in the early ‘20’s to 5,260 in 1931 (Blake, 158). Clearly divorce was extensively beneficial to the economy, and once the precedent of quick and easy divorces had been established, society never turned back to their stricter laws. This establishment of divorce as something largely socially acceptable made it possible for women to pursue personal satisfaction in marriage. They were no longer tied down in unsuccessful and unsatisfying marriages, and they were free from the social pressures that obligated them to stay in these marriages.

William Carson emphasized this shift away from Victorian Era obligations by stating in 1915 that “the increase in divorce is, in reality, a healthy sign, providing, as it does, that people have become less tolerant of evils which were once endured and for which divorce is the only remedy” (Blake, 151). The last part of this quote is a good summary of the way society viewed divorce in the 1920’s. Divorce has been beneficial in the way it banished the Victorian ideas that essentially forced women to stay with their husbands out of duty and obligation with no hope of finding personal satisfaction. In their search for personal satisfaction, many of those who got divorces ended up remarrying and theoretically finding personal satisfaction in a second marriage. Through divorce, it was not the independence from men that was gained, but rather an independence to make decisions within the marriage relationship. It was this freedom to choose that really changed marriage and divorce in the 1920’s.

In the late 1920’s there were even novels published and films directed that emphasized this freedom for women. It was essentially the last push the guaranteed that divorce was socially acceptable. The film *Divorcée* released in 1930, loosely based off of the novel *The Ex-Wife* published in 1929, is a story about a married couple. The husband cheats on the wife and the wife returns his injustice by doing the same. A divorce is in the planning stages as the couple is separated. However, after neither of the two main characters finds happiness in other love interests, they come back to each other. It is a romantic tale of how divorce and adultery can actually bring two people together instead of tearing them apart. The film was so successful in theaters that it actually had an extended stay. Celello mentioned it in her novel saying “*The Divorcée* quickly became one of the “stand-out hits of the early summer season” of 1930, and popular demand extended its run throughout the nation” (15). The fact that this film was so popular again reiterates that divorce became socially acceptable in the 20s and this allowed women to seek personal satisfaction in marriage, instead of being forced to stay with someone who has had an affair.

For those women that did not find divorce to be an acceptable route out of an unsatisfying marriage, there were marriage experts. Women had turned to the experts in all other aspects of their home duties (cooking, cleaning, decorating, etc.), so why not turn to the experts in regards to their marriages? In fact, marriage experts specifically targeted women for their services. Women were the primary consumers of the home, so it seemed only fit for them to be consumers of expert advice as well as home products. This plethora of experts were supposedly telling women exactly what it would take to have a successful and fulfilling marriage, if only they would work hard enough. Kristin Celello addresses this topic of working on a marriage and the input of marriage experts in her novel, *Making Marriage Work: A History of Marriage and Divorce in the Twentieth-century United States*. Her main argument is that in the 1920’s and 1930’s there was a shift in how marriage was perceived by society. Marriage became something that needed to be continually “worked on” to be successful and personally satisfying (Celello 9). Furthermore, she argues that this shift is due to primarily two things – “deep-seated anxiety about divorce” and “Americans’ desire to have stronger, more satisfying marital relationships,” (Celello 3). This is supported by the steadiness in the number of marriages (as people stayed in their relationships and “worked out” their problems) (U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare 7) as well as the increase in the number of divorces which must have led to their anxiety (8). Celello refers to the development of marriage counseling and experts on marriage – a phenomenon that began in the 1920’s – as evidence of the shift in marriage (Celello 3). With marriage counseling as a new option for women to address their need for personal satisfaction in marriage, women were even more able than ever before to actually achieve personal satisfaction and voice their desires to their spouses.

We have found that through the acknowledgement of women’s sexual desires, the acceptance of divorce by society and the opportunity for openness in relationships through marriage counseling that women in the 1920’s were able to seek personal satisfaction in marriage instead of being confined by Victorian expectations of marriage. Additionally, a successful marriage was defined by the amount of personal satisfaction a woman gained from her relationship to her husband. This could have a few possible implications for marriage and particularly marriage counseling today. If this is still the case and personal satisfaction is still the criteria for a successful marriage, then counselors can use this knowledge when dealing with clients to best approach the problems in their marriage and have the best hope of a solution. Furthermore, this can be investigated by scholars as a factor in the excessive divorce rates of our nation.

Along with implications for marriage counselors and scholars, there are a number of potential questions that my research brings to bear. For example, how have conceptions of marriage and divorce changed since the 1920s? How did this emphasis on personal satisfaction affect other areas of women’s lives besides marriage? Lastly, was this emphasis on personal satisfaction an actuality for other races and social groups besides white middle-class? The New Woman was by default a white middle-class woman, so the criteria of personal satisfaction in marriage may or may not have pervaded other social classes and racial groups. I find this to be the most fascinating question for further research and hope someday to find the time to carry on my research and further investigate these fascinating topics.

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